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# ‘Teachers are kind to those who have good marks’: a study of Japanese young people’s views of fairness and equity in school

## **Abstract**

This paper presents the results from a study of Japanese young people’s views of being treated fairly in school and considers the extent to which their experiences differ from their peers in schools in England. The study involved 1,191 students from nine Japanese junior high schools in their final year of study. Their experiences are compared with those of 2,836 English students of the same age. Our findings suggest that while many Japanese students report positive experiences of school, many were also able to identify instances where their perceived treatment was unfair or inconsistent. These instances include teachers having students who are treated as ‘favourites’, and the apparent unequal allocation of punishments and rewards. In this respect, the reported experiences of the Japanese students were similar to those of their English peers and therefore provided no evidence to support recent ‘crisis accounts’ of the ‘examination hell’ and excessive academic pressures that are purportedly experienced by young people in Japanese schools. Nevertheless, our evidence does suggest that teacher initial and continuing development would benefit from the inclusion of rather more on the principles of equity.

## **Introduction**

Key objectives of education development are to increase participation and achievement among school students, especially those facing disadvantage in terms of language, poverty, ability and special needs, and to enhance their enjoyment of learning and their preparation for citizenship (Author 2010a). Much education research concerns achievement and participation, but less effort has been put into considering how to promote experiences of fairness, enjoyment and ‘good’ citizenship, and how to recognise success or failure in this (EGREES 2005, Dyson 2008). In this paper we present the findings from an international study which examined the experiences of fairness and equity among young people in junior high schools in Japan, comparing their views with those of students of similar age who go to school in England.

For many students, their experience of school is fundamental to their aspirations, conception of wider society, their place as citizens, and their sense of justice (Gorard et al. 2007, Osler 2010). Thus, students’ experiences of justice and, especially, injustice could undermine their interpersonal and institutional trust, promote passive attitudes towards political and civic participation, generate intolerance towards others who are clearly ‘different’, and even lead them to doubt whether an equitable existence is possible. There is a need for research which considers how schools create citizens - through formal teaching, as well as in their encouragement of student participation in community activities, democratic structures and inclusive arrangements (Authors 2008). If we view schools as micro-societies we might surmise that the learning of justice and fairness in school will help shape young people’s notions of justice and equity outside

school. In Japan, the balance between developing academic skills and the role of the school in shaping future citizens is of particular interest.

The paper starts with a brief description of the relevant schooling system in Japan, contrasting it with that of England. It continues with an outline of the methods used in this new study, a presentation of the results and views from students, and the paper concludes with a discussion of the possible implications for teachers and school systems.

## **Education in Japan**

The majority of Japanese students have three years of senior high school (DeCocker 2002, OECD 2009). Compulsory education ends with junior high school at the age of 15, although around 95% of students remain in education and proceed to senior high school (Parmenter 2006). High stakes testing occurs at the end of junior high school, when students sit entrance examinations for senior high school. These entrance examinations are taken extremely seriously. Competition to secure a place in a highly regarded senior school is intense because they have long been seen as the gateways to an elite or high quality university, which in turn can lead to high status employment (Roesgaard 1998).

Japan's place in contemporary education discourse is characterised by its success in international comparative tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Tsuneyoshi 2004). For example, the findings from PISA for 2006 show Japanese 15 year olds ranked in the top three countries for achievement in science (OECD 2007). One consequence of this has been that nations who occupy a mid-table position in the international rankings, such as the UK and USA, view Japan as an academic success story whose policies, such as centralised control over the curriculum and text books and emphasis on academic excellence, are to be 'borrowed' by those seeking to emulate its position. Success in academic terms has been accompanied by a recent history of economic success, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, which has led Western commentators to draw parallels between the effectiveness of Japanese schools and the success of the Japanese economy (for example, National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

However, such success is accompanied internally by a very different perspective on Japan's education system, and one which is characterised by a 'crisis account' of failing students (Tsuneyoshi 2004, Cave 2001). There are descriptions of the 'examination hell' faced by young Japanese, and the prescriptive control that schools have over their lives, sometimes with tragic consequences. Some accounts point to the 'dark underside' of Japanese education, where high scores on international tests have come at a high price and where students are subjected to intense pressures within the confines of a restrictive curriculum (Young 1993). The consequences can be serious, with Japanese schools purportedly characterised by high levels of teenage suicide, bullying and violence, as well as increasing numbers of students who simply refuse to attend (Okano and Tsuchiya

1999, Ryoko 2001, Slee et al. 2003). Consider, for example, this description of Japanese schools by Yoneyama (1999, p.244):

The Japanese high school, to which students are bound, is a stifling place. Its organizational structure is extremely formal, rigid and autocratic... students largely do not expect things like understanding, respect and personal care from teachers.

It may be the case that the pedagogical style is more formal in senior high school, but elementary and junior high schools, in particular, have been described by others as being highly egalitarian, creative and active learning environments, where students take responsibility for their own learning, and where teachers emphasise educating the whole child and promote collaborative and cooperative learning (Tsuchida and Lewis 1999, Stevenson 2002, Ryoko 2001). In Japan there tends to be greater overlap in the concepts of citizenship, culture and identity than can be found in many European countries (Parmenter, 2006). Within compulsory education (age 5-16), citizenship forms a relatively small part of the curriculum and is most formally taught as part of social studies where it is taught alongside geography and history. More informally, citizenship education is spread across all aspects of schooling, including other curriculum subjects, extra-curricular activities and the routines of school life. It is arguably at its most explicit within moral education, an aspect of the curriculum which 'transcends the timetable' and the aim of which is:

through all school activities, to cultivate morality in the form of moral sentiments, powers of judgement and the motivation and attitudes to put these into practice (Parmenter, Mizuyama and Taniguchi, 2008, p.209).

Japanese young people are encouraged to develop a sense of shared values and ethics, as well as social and moral responsibility and respect (Miller 2009, Tanaka 2009). The way in which these aspects of 'moral education' manifest themselves in students' experiences at school is one focus of this paper, as it the extent to which students themselves describe an 'examination hell'.

## **Research Approach**

In 2005 the European Union funded a two year study into the views and experiences fairness of young people in five European countries. This took the form of a questionnaire survey of over 12,000 14 and 15 year old students in England, France, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Italy (Authors 2005, Authors 2010). This new study replicates, as far as possible, the research instrument used in that original study, with young people of the same age who were attending school in Japan. The difficulties in replicating a research instrument which was designed for use with young people in Europe with their peers in Japan were well recognised by the researchers. However, this study provided an interesting insight into how Japanese young people construct their

notions of fairness and the extent to which these views reflect those of their peers in European, specifically English, schools.

Examining Japanese schooling culture from a Western perspective is not unproblematic; it is possible that a dissonance may occur between the terms, concepts and ideals which Western researchers may take for granted but which might be misunderstood or unfamiliar to Japanese school children (Shimizu 2000). The research presented here follows a tradition of work undertaken by Western academics, particularly in the late 1990s, who wish to understand more about the complexities of school life in Japan. Some of this work has had a focus on educational policy and reform (Cummings 1989, Cave 2001), others have conducted ethnographic accounts of life in the Japanese High School (LeTendre, 1999). In order to evaluate Japanese education in this way, many of these works approach the subject in a cross-cultural manner, characterizing Japanese education in comparison to educational practices and achievements of other countries, most frequently the United States (Tamura 2007). In the present study, we draw our comparative analysis from our similar work with young people in schools in England.

The questionnaire that was used in the current and the European study was developed in four sections each of which addressed a particular domain of justice. These are described briefly below, but for further detail see Authors (2010):

1. The *prevalence and character of injustice* section addressed the ‘amount’ and type of injustice students perceived that they experienced. So for example, it included statements like: *my teachers treat my opinions with respect even when we disagree* or *I was left out by other students*.
2. The *causes/sources of injustice* section was concerned with uncovering what students themselves feel are the causes of injustice. It gathered students’ views on what they felt a fair school ought to be like: *Teachers should treat students’ opinions with respect even if they disagree*
3. The next section addresses the so-called ‘*effects*’ of *injustice* experienced at school. We were concerned to explore associations between perceived unfair treatment and academic, as well as social, confidence (e.g. *school was a waste of time for me; I enjoyed working in groups with other students*).
4. It is likely that young people’s sense of justice, their aspirations and expectations of their trajectories in society will be influenced by outside factors as well, such as parental background and their relationships with parents. The *external factors influencing sense of justice* section therefore included questions about the confidence with, and treatment by parents (e.g. *My parents are usually interested in my well-being*) as well as wider political and societal views (e.g. *It is ok to lie to avoid being punished*).

Several iterations of the Japanese version of the questionnaire were produced which attempted to account for the different cultural and educational experiences of Japanese

students in comparison with their peers in Europe. Considerations included the accurate translation of terms such as ‘fairness’, ‘justice’ and ‘respect’. The questionnaire comprised a series of closed questions which were presented on a five point scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with an opportunity for a neutral response). A short section at the end of the questionnaire enabled students to provide extended comments about their own experiences of (un)fairness. While the majority of respondents did complete this final section, it was optional and so their comments, which we use later, cannot be seen as being representative of the experiences of the whole sample. The questionnaire was translated and back translated by researchers who were Japanese native speakers and piloted with 45 students who shared the characteristics of the main sample.

The main sample was drawn from nine junior high schools that were selected to provide a range of school types and locations drawn from across Japan (Table 1). Students who participated in the main survey were in Grade 9, the final year of junior high school and were aged 14-15 years. In total, 1,191 Japanese students participated in the study which took place in Spring 2009. The English sample schools were chosen from a list of all schools with Grade 9 students (aged 14-15years) and stratified according to school size, with at least one participating class of 25-30 students per school. The achieved sample was 2,836 students. For further details about the selection of the English schools see Authors (2010). Although broadly representative, the Japanese schools who participated in this study were not selected randomly, and the English schools involved so many replacements that they are not considered random. Therefore it is unnecessary, and would be incorrect of us, to use sampling theory derivatives such as significance tests or standard errors here (Gorard 2006). We are concerned only with the scale of any differences observed. The findings are organised into three sections, consisting of the students’ own relationships with their teachers, the students’ views of other students’ relationship with teachers, and finally students’ relationship with their peers.

Table 1 - The characteristics of the Japanese schools who participated in the study

School number	Characteristics of school	Number of students
1	Regional, public mixed sex	109
2	Urban, private, single sex	149
3	Regional, private, single sex	168
4	Urban, public, mixed sex	162
5	Urban, public, mixed sex	111
6	Urban, private, mixed sex	202
7	Regional, public, mixed sex	63
8	Regional, public, mixed sex	69
9	Regional, public, mixed sex	158

### *Recoding the response scale*

One feature of the responses from the Japanese students was the relatively high number of neutral answers – neither agree nor disagree. For example, almost half of the students offered a neutral response to the statement ‘*Teachers treat my opinions with respect even if we disagree*’. A similar proportion were neither able to agree nor disagree with

statements about whether or not their teachers encouraged them to make up their own minds (irony noted). This level of neutral response was higher than that from the other countries involved in the original study. This means that for both agree and disagree the percentages from Japan tend to be lower for many questions. Table 2 provides some illustration of the level of neutral answers for the Japanese students in comparison with their English peers.

Table 2 - Percentage of students providing neutral responses to selected questions

	Japan	England
Teachers treated my opinion with respect even if we disagree	50	33
Teachers encouraged me to make up my own mind	45	32
Teachers have been interested in my well-being	45	37

One possible explanation for this is that the concepts used here may translate poorly into Japanese, and so the key meanings behind these questions were unclear to the Japanese participants – although nothing in their fuller comments suggests this. A better explanation may be that the issues we were asking about were less familiar to this group of students. Perhaps they have not considered that there might be an egalitarian relationship between teacher and student, and so such questions led to a genuinely neutral response on this occasion. Or perhaps the students were not used to social mores that encourage or even permit disagreement.

The relatively large proportion of Japanese students who gave neutral responses led us to recode the responses of both the English and Japanese students to allow a reasonable comparison between them. We ignored the neutral responses for the purposes of this paper. This means that in ensuing tables the frequencies are calculated only from those students who expressed a view (either for or against the statement). And, for tidiness, we present only the percentage agreeing with any view (the percentage disagreeing being 100 minus the percentage agreeing, in each case). This recoding makes presentation easier, but does not fundamentally change the results in any respect (see Authors 2010).

## What did students tell us?

### *Relationships between students and their teachers*

In general, students in Japan and England answered questions similarly, once the issue of neutrality has been dealt with. We mean by this that for almost all questions, where there was broad agreement with a statement in Japan there was also broad agreement in England, and *vice versa*. Of course the precise percentages agreeing varied in each country. However, given the sampling variability, the level of sample replacement, and the inevitable response and measurement error involved in dealing with ideas of justice, this minor variation in percentages would be expected even if the situation was identical in both countries. So, in Table 3 for example, the last item has the same percentages for both countries, whereas the penultimate item shows a slightly higher percentage agreement for England. The difference is so small that these two rows are both treated in

the same way, as showing equivalence between countries. The item in the first row, on the other hand, shows a markedly higher level of agreement in England. This is, tentatively, assumed to portray a difference worthy of comment and further consideration.

Table 3 - Percentage of students agreeing with each statement about their relationship with teachers, Japan and England

	Japan	England
I trusted my teachers to be fair	52	81
School has been a waste of time for me	13	9
Teachers got angry with me in front of the whole class	42	57
Teachers treated my opinion with respect even if we disagreed	58	64
Teachers encouraged me to make up my own mind	63	84
I was always treated fairly by my teachers	72	59
Teachers treated me no better or worse than other students	82	63
Teachers have been interested in my well-being	63	69
I got along well with my teachers	87	87

Only a small proportion of students felt that school had been a waste of time and the consensus in both countries was that generally school was a fair place. Taking Table 3 as a whole the situation is not clearly preferable in either country. Students in England seem to have more autonomy, and teachers in Japan seem less likely to get angry in front of a class, and so on. But many items have similar scores. Most students responded positively to questions concerning their relationship with teachers, with a clear majority of students in both countries agreeing that they get on well with their teachers, for example.

Students from Japan report less autonomy than the English students in their learning – being less positive about being allowed to make up their own mind up and having their opinions treated with respect. One says:

[Teacher] listens to the opinions of students who have good marks, but he ignores others who have low marks or who he does not like. This is strange. Teachers should not differentiate students (Japan, male)

Of course, this kind of experience is not limited to Japan:

I expressed an opinion in class, my teacher disregarded it, then another student said the same thing and she congratulated them. My opinion was not respected. (England, female)

Table 3 also shows that only around two thirds of students say that their teachers are interested in their well-being. Whether student views are accurate or not, the fact that they report these experiences should be a concern across both countries. As we shall see below, there is a possible tension between the nature of the fair treatment that students report that they ought to experience and the level of attention that teachers might feel is commensurate with effective pedagogic practice. It is intriguing that Japanese students



are less likely than English students to report trusting their teachers to be fair, but more likely to consider that they had been treated fairly in fact (and no better or worse than their peers). For the English students the pattern is obviously the reverse.

Whereas Table 3 and the related discussion is about individual students relationships with teachers, we also asked students what they observe about pupil:teacher interaction more generally (Table 4). Again, there is considerable similarity across the two countries, with most students witnessing a teacher getting angry with others, treating hard-working students better, and having favoured students more generally. A smaller number reported teachers treating students' opinions with respect and treating them all the same way in class. So, student reports of observed interactions are generally less favourable (Table 4) than they are when students are asked about themselves (Table 3). Part of this is to be expected by simple frequency. For example, if a teacher has been angry with some but not all students in a class, then the number of students correctly reporting that a teacher was angry with them will be less than the number reporting seeing a teacher angry. However, in terms of formation of a sense of justice the general picture is disquieting. Even if a student is not treated unfairly themselves they see unfairness occurring in the class, and this could have an effect on their sense of the worlds as a fair place, in role-modelling terms, or it could mean that they themselves are being favoured.

Table 4 - Percentage of students agreeing with each statement about the relationship of most students with their teachers

	Japan	England
Teachers got angry with a student in front of the whole class	83	94
Teachers gave extra help to those students who needed it	60	86
Hardworking students were usually treated the best	63	83
Teachers had favourite students	86	89
Teachers treated students' opinions with respect even if they disagreed	48	60
All students were treated the same way in class	54	41

Many students observed that teachers were inconsistent and unfair when punishing students, or had favourites and that certain groups of students (for example, in the case of Japan, those who needed extra help) were treated differently to others. Indeed, probably the greatest area of concern among the Japanese students was about teachers' apparently indiscriminate way of allocating rewards and punishments

When I made the same mistake as another student, the teacher shouted at me and struck me, but he did not get angry with another student and he just laughed at him (Japan, male).

In the history class, I left my book and I got yelled at for five or ten minutes and the teacher hit my head about ten times, also, I was called back after the class. When another student, who was cleverer than I, left his book, he was told only to go home to bring it, but he was neither hit nor called back afterwards (Japan, male).

Some students dye their hair and behave aggressively, and teachers cannot deal with them and they are not disciplined. But teachers are very strict to some other people who did something wrong. Teachers are scared of some students and it affects our lessons (Japan, female).

When I brought my mobile phone to school, I got yelled at very severely so that I did not want to come to school. But when another student, who is always defiant and behaves violently, brought one in, the teacher did not say anything to him. When I coloured my hair, I also got yelled at, but the teachers did not say anything to that student when he coloured his hair (Japan, male)

This perceived unequal treatment of groups of students also includes those who are seen to be the teacher's favourites in both countries:

I try really hard in all my tests and homework, but I don't get grades which reflect the effort I put into it. Also some teachers have their favourites and ignore others (England, female)

In history, the teachers 'favourites' don't get punished, can walk round the room, even walk out of the room, and not get punished. The rest of the class isn't acknowledged (England, male).

Teachers treat their favourite students in different way from other students. I always think it is unfair. When their attitude towards me is very cold, or they ignore me, I feel irritated (Japan, male).

There is a big difference in teachers' attitudes towards students between those who have good marks and those who do not (Japan, male).

Mr X listens to opinions of students who have good marks, but he ignores others who have low marks or who he does not like. This is strange. Teachers should not differentiate students (Japan, male).

In English lessons, when a student cannot translate a sentence, the teacher always calls the specific student and says 'X, translate it'. It has been like this since I was in the 1<sup>st</sup> year. I do not get angry about it anymore, but I'm disgusted with it. I am disappointed with this school because there is a teacher who shows they have favourites' (Japan, female).

It will go on forever once we start to count unfairness. What annoys me the most is some specific students always escape from being punished because of their excuses, while other students have to do some punishments such as cleaning for a week. It is teachers' fault this unfairness. It seems impossible to change this, but I hope to change (Japan, male).

These comments from the Japanese and English students may point to a slightly different perspective on which groups of students are favoured by their teachers. The English students tend to be concerned that their peers who were less academically successful or who misbehaved in class claimed the lion's share of the teacher's attention and praise. Among the Japanese students it was overwhelmingly the students who achieved the highest marks who were seen to be favoured. This is suggested in Table 4 and in the extended views of Japanese and English students about teachers providing additional help in class: put simply by one Japanese student 'Teachers are kind to those who have good marks'.

One distinctive area of Japanese school culture is the after school club. Such clubs are popular among students, and attendance tends to be high (Steger 2006, LeTendre 2001). In addition to sporting and computing activities, students can also learn traditional activities such as kendo and origami. The role of the teacher or club coach is very important. In addition to providing supervision and instruction, they are also expected to provide guidance (*shidō*). Indeed according to Rohlen and LeTendre (1998, p.278) these clubs are 'crucial to guiding students in learning the adult norms of conduct in socially stratified situations'. It is interesting therefore that in our study, many students made unprompted reference to perceived injustices related to club activities:

In club activity, students who are good at the sports from the beginning have a lot of opportunities for practice and games. But others who are not good at it cannot join in with the games (Japan, male).

While a friend who broke the school rule was discharged from the club, another student who broke the law was not punished so severely (Japan, male).

Two students came late for club activity because they had to take an extra test. One of them was a regular player, and the other was a player on the bench. The former one was scolded lightly but the latter got yelled at for more than fifteen minutes (Japan, male).

Students who learn quickly are taught more than others in the club activity (Japan, male)

It is such episodes, as much as anything, that help students decide to report that a school, club or teacher is unfair. Discrimination in terms of need, effort and attainment are all widely accepted or even encouraged, but to be punished more harshly than another for the same thing leads to resentment. It is not the punishment or reward in itself that is objected to. Such punishments and rewards must be warranted, and distributed proportionately and clearly.

A mismatch, between how students would like their teachers to treat them and how they are treated in practice, is clear from the responses shown in Tables 5 and 6. For any aspect of justice, we generally asked all students about their own experiences with teachers, how they observe teachers treating others, and what they would like to happen

in an ideal school. Table 5 illustrates such a grouping. As shown above, students were generally more positive about their own experiences than those of others. So, most students felt that teachers explained new topics sufficiently for them (although 30% did not). In Japan, a much lower proportion of students felt that teachers explained new topics sufficiently for all others. And in both countries, many more students wanted teachers to continue explaining new topics more than they currently do. In England, in effect, all students want teachers to explain until all students understand.

Table 5 - Comparison between actual and desired treatment in school, percentage of students who agree.

	Japan	England
Teachers continued explaining until I understood the topic	73	69
Teachers continued explaining until all students understood the topic	46	63
Teachers should continue explaining until all students understand the topic	77	96

A similar but slightly weaker pattern appears in Table 6. Only around 60% of students felt that their opinions were treated with respect by teachers, and even fewer felt that student opinions were generally treated with respect. Many more in both countries wanted teachers to be more respectful to student ideas, and again all students in England want this. And the same pattern is repeated with most other items, such as whether hard-working students are, and should be, treated better than other students. If we concede that these students are not asking for something ridiculous, costly or undesirable, then it seems that the school system in both countries is deficient in the quality of student:teacher relationships. We have observed in other studies in England how little it really takes to satisfy students in this regard, and what an impact a feeling of being treated fairly and as a co-operative learner can have (Author 2011). As shown in Tables 5 and 6, demand for justice and equitable treatment is high in England. But in Japan the discrepancy between desired and actual treatment is as high simply because the reported levels of equitable interaction are lower in Japan. Perhaps as student:teacher relationships improve the demand for equitable treatment grows as well.

Table 6 - Comparison between actual and desired treatment in school, percentage of students who agree.

	Japan	England
Teachers treated my opinion with respect even if we disagreed	58	64
Teachers treated students' opinions with respect even if they disagreed	48	60
Teachers should treat students' opinions with respect even if they disagree	75	98

### *Relationships between students and other students*

Turning to student:student interactions, many reports are positive as they were with student:teacher relationships, both in Japan and England (Table 7). Almost all students had good friends at school, and enjoyed working with others. It is important to stress these positive results and similarities so that discussion of any divergences is considered

proportionately. Japanese students are less likely to report having friends who are not from Japan. Given the homogeneity of Japanese society, such findings are perhaps unexpected. However, for some students, school can be a negative experience. Around 15% of students felt that they were left out by their peers, and a similar proportion report being bullied. The numbers who report being deliberately hurt by another student is also relatively high, especially in Japan where around a third of students reporting this experience. Around a quarter of Japanese students report having had an item stolen in the current school year, and this figure is even higher in England.

Table 7 - Percentage of students agreeing with each statement about their relationship with other students

	Japan	England
I have good friends in school	96	98
I had a friend(s) who gets low marks at school	91	86
I enjoyed working with other students	82	94
I was deliberately hurt by another student(s)	36	26
I had a friend(s) who doesn't come from [country of test]	34	59
Something of mine was stolen	23	35
I was left out by other students	14	15
I was bullied by other students	14	18

As discussed earlier, the issue of bullying within Japanese schools has received widespread attention from Western commentators. Particular focus has been paid to *ijime* bullying which, according to Slee et al. (2003), is somewhat different to the conception of bullying in European countries, and which is characterised by the victims being excluded, isolated, and intimidated (Tam and Taki, 2007). Interestingly in this study, the experiences of the Japanese students with regard to bullying itself were little different from those reported by the English students. This pattern is in contrast to other recent research which has suggested that Japanese students experience high levels of bullying both from other students and from their teachers (Berliner and Biddle, 1995; Tam and Taki, 2007). And perhaps in this study there was confusion or conflation here in the translation between being hurt and being bullied. There might also have been a misalignment between our Westernised concept of bullying and *ijime* bullying as conceived by the Japanese students. Another possible explanation for the discrepancy between the relatively lower instances of bullying experienced by our sample and some aspects of the research literature is offered by Okano and Tsuchuja (1999). They suggest that reported levels of bullying tend to be lower in Japan than in other countries because Japanese students are more ambivalent to instances of bullying and are less likely to consider bullying as wrong – perhaps leading it to be under-reported in studies of the nature reported here. However, from the comments we received from the students it is clear that some Japanese students do conceive bullying in similar ways to their peers in the West and are also able to recognise its injustices:

I am called by a nickname that I do not like. Other people are not called by their nicknames. It is only me who is called like that (Japan, male)

One of my friends often hits me, but he is kind to others. It is unfair (Japan, male)

I always get told off for other peoples' wrong doing I always get kicked out and excluded/suspended for things that weren't my fault and always get done for bullying when I don't bully (England, male).

Bullying by students is intrinsically unfair and unpleasant, but for several students the teachers also bear some responsibility for not dealing with it adequately, or in some examples equitably:

When I said to a teacher that I was bullied, he did not listen to me. But when his favourite student went to say that he was bullied, the teacher listened to him (Japan, male)

Somebody was bullying me and hit me when no one watched. The teachers did not respond to this so I pushed the person over. I was the one who got told off (England, male)

## Conclusions

The extent to which student experiences and their interactions with teachers relate to outcomes such as aspiration and readiness for the future is an important question for any school system. What happens in school can impact on life outside and beyond school (Author 2010b). We therefore needed to ask students about these experiences and their impact. It appears that students in both countries have quite clear notions of what constitutes just and unjust behaviour in school and are generally able to articulate these ideas. Asking them about their experiences of school in this context does not lead to excessive complaining, but rather to what appears to be a considered account of those actions, by their peers and their teachers, which students see as being unfair and inequitable. The young people, from both England and Japan, who participated in this study generally regarded their school experience as being fair. Many students enjoy their education, having been treated well at school, and feel that their learning has purpose. Most have good friends, and only a minority report unpleasant episodes such as bullying. Many students trust their teachers and find them helpful and supportive. On the other hand, a significant minority of students report that their school experience is not fair and, in particular, observe that their teachers were inconsistent and unfair when administering punishments and rewards.

In Japan the Fundamental Education Law (*Kyōiku Kihonhō*) states that 'teachers shall be servants of the whole community' (in Okano and Tsuchiya, 1999 p143). The notion of teachers serving the 'whole community' means that teachers have to pay regard to their students' 'emotional, social, physical and mental development' (Okano and Tsuchiya, 1999, p.172, Miller 2009). This involves providing 'lifestyle guidance' and may even extend to matters such as hygiene and behaviour outside school. In this way the relationship between student and teacher in Japanese schools might be assumed to be

different to those in England. For despite the relatively recent Every Child Matters legislation in England, and the introduction of a citizenship syllabus, the overall pressure for successive administrations has been to emulate Pacific Rim countries like Japan and improve academic attainment, especially as measured in international tests.

The Japanese students certainly report less autonomy than the English students in their learning – being less positive about being allowed to make up their own mind and having their opinions treated with respect. But issues of bullying and other unpleasant episodes, at least in student relationships, were no worse in Japan than England. As we discussed at the start of this paper, researching such a culturally and linguistically sensitive topic with young people in Japan could have been more problematic. For example, we had concerns about the extent to which terms such as ‘fairness’, ‘justice’ and ‘respect’ would be accurately translated into Japanese, as well as whether Japanese students would be comfortable with telling us about negative interactions they may have had with their teachers. Instead from the comments we received and the overall similarity of the responses to the English sample, it appears that Japanese students are able to respond to these concepts and articulate their ideas in much the same way as their European peers.

Indeed, one finding to emerge from this study is the similarity of students’ experiences in both countries. Despite the obvious cultural, social and structural differences between schools in England and Japan, it appears that, in general, students share roughly similar types of experience, both positive and negative. In the Japanese students’ responses, there were no specific references to the excessive workload, examination pressure, bullying and expectation to conform that have been a feature of some writers’ work on the Japanese education system during the 1980s and 1990s (Yoneyama 1999, Schoolland 1990). This is interesting, because the Japanese education system has for some time been popularly characterised, at least among many Western writers, as over authoritarian and ‘top-down’ in its leadership, with a curriculum which emphasises rote learning and academic excellence to the possible detriment of the well-being of its students (BBC 2006, Fitzgerald 2006, Manzo 2002, 2008). The findings we present here challenge elements of that view, and emphasise the similarity of the student experience across these two systems which are characterised by their cultural and educational differences. Perhaps mutual policy- and practice-borrowing as a consequence of international testing has brought the school systems together, or perhaps the experiences of young people in schools was never as far apart as some commentators have suggested.

There are problems, but they appear in both systems, and are exemplified by the discrepancy between the respect and equity that nearly all students want and their reports of interactions with teachers (and to a lesser extent other students). Equity can be considered to represent that sense of fairness which underlies decisions about the principles of justice to apply in different domains for a given set of actors. Put simply, it is an internal template forming part of how we know something is fair. Equity is an important ideal for education, in terms of school as a lived experience as well as its longer-term outcomes for citizens and society. Where equity is denied, negative consequences follow. In this study, despite the positive experiences of most students, there were clear situations which were regarded as unfair. Most notable were students’

observations of the differential treatment of students by their teachers. This is an important finding, for how can a curriculum for citizenship in either country, which embraces issues of fairness and democracy, be effectively implemented if the students themselves do not mostly believe that their teachers are generally capable of fairness and support for democracy in school? In one sense, it does not really matter what the curriculum states about citizenship compared to the importance for students of experiencing respectful interactions and genuine participation in the decision-making relevant to their own learning.

If we accept the reports illustrated in this paper, and they appear robust in the sense that they appear in every country we have studied (Authors 2010), it means that both school systems could improve quite substantially quite easily. The key may be teacher preparation and development. The ideas of equity appear hardly or not at all in teacher development, and where they do they largely concern issues such as the differential attainment of social sub-groups. Perhaps what teachers need reminding of is that any principle of equity, like equal treatment or recognition of talent, is only fair within a limited domain, like when allocating attention or awarding marks. In summary, what the students in this paper are objecting to when they talk of favourites and so on is where teachers inadvertently carry a principle of equity that is fair in one domain to another in which it is not. It should take little resource to keep reminding teachers of this important fact, and of the benefits that could follow in terms of student enjoyment of school.

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